

The Representation of the Polluted Body—A Study of Resistance in the Selected Poems of Sukirtharani

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ABSTRACT:

The Historically neglected and suppressed voices of the Dalit community find their expressions in the subjective genres of the Dalit Literature. The Subjugation done on them in terms of the Caste has been predominant throughout ages. But while deciphering the long-past narratives of oppressions on the Dalit people, scholars often forget the gender and eventually sidelining or marginalizing the Dalit women's narratives. This exclusion of the Dalit women from the elitist Neo-colonial upper-caste Historians as well as Indian feminist tradition lead the Dalit women poets such as Sukirtharani to take up with the gender issues and bodily sufferings of the Dalit women in her poems. This research paper would show how Dalit women are oppressed in terms of their 'polluted body' along with the caste identity. The Intra-patriarchy within the Dalit community makes the Dalit women dominated by 'double patriarchy' which eventually leads them to lose their voices. This unique subalternity of the Dalit women find expressions in some of the poems of Sukirtharani who evokes that dehumanized body of the Dalit women as a weapon to write the narratives of resistance.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Polluted Body, Marginalization, Intra-patriarchy, Double Patriarchy, Resistance.

The poetic presentation of the contemporary Tamil Dalit poet Sukirtharani sets a remarkable transformation in the aesthetics of the Dalit poetry in India. She focuses on the subversion of the already politicized norms regarding the Dalit Woman body. The elitist feminism and exclusionary static historic representations of the Dalit woman body have the voiceless existence in the margin or even margin within the periphery. The systematic dominance and violence on the Dalit woman body are considered as small voices so far. Julie Stephens in "Feminist Fiction— A Critique of Indian Feminism" termed their voices as "not said" (Stephens 204). But Sukirtharani's

poems debunk that homogenizing notion of polluted body of the Dalit woman through the truthful and authentic presentations of the Dalit Women's sufferings in terms of not only caste but also gender. This dismantling of the hegemonic caste dimension of the untouchable body of the Dalit woman runs into the verses of Sukirtharani. Her voice in those poems carry the marks of blasphemy and obscenity while presenting the naked and so-called polluted body of the Dalit woman. It creates a sense of different Dalit aesthetics while showcasing the alternative way of resistance and revolt from the part of the Dalit women. Her poetic language is often termed as

raw and ugly as she portrays in the utmost frankness the bodily feelings and sufferings of the Dalit woman in the poems. Her poetry and the liberating vocabulary within them have become weapons to her to express her defiance not only against the elitist Indian feminism and exclusionary history of India but also against the Intra-patriarchy. In “Dalit Women Talk Differently” Gopal Guru writes “Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them” (Guru 67).

Originally written in Tamil, the poems are translated by Laxmi Holmstrom and compiled in the Anthology *Wild Words—Four Tamil Poets*. Holmstrom enumerates in the Translator’s Note of this book: “For Sukirtharani, it is not only a Dalit story that the body tells, it is equally a feminist story. The body, for her, carries not only the map of a history; in its turn it maps its own pleasure and pains, its surprises and turbulences” (Sukirtharani 119). To Sukirtharani the body is not only a casteist concept of inert flesh but a living entity of blood too capable of ‘voicing’ the pains and sufferings so as to use the word in Spivakian sense.

Sukirtharani gives a detailed description of the narratives of Dalit women life in her poems. Through the portrayal of the Dalit life in her poems, she categorically emphasizes to show the position of the Dalit women in Tamil society. Her poems are the reminders of the historical oppression caste on the Dalit women from generations. The Dalit life that she portrayed in her poems is one of oppressed and suppressed one which has very often been vulnerable in the hands of the upper caste patriarchy. The description of her Dalit life in Tamil society is based on the divisiveness of the caste-based society where on one side the light prevails in the upper-caste area and darkness prevails on the other side i.e. Dalit area. The poet’s own lived reality turns out to be the subjective or lyrical testimony of her suffering as a Dalit woman in the Tamil society. Regarding the Dalit woman body P. Olivelle, in *Dharmasutras- The Law Codes of Ancient India* mentions such impure

Dalit woman body. It is said that if any twins accidentally see a Dalit woman, they must be resurrected according to the laws of the scriptures. This perception of the impure and cursed Dalit woman’s body is the offsprings of the untouchability in the mainstream society. This way the Dalit women and their bodies have been excluded from the mainstream to the margin. But the Dalit poets like Sukirtharani advocates that this impure bodies are replete with the utmost possibilities of creativity. On the other hand, this impurity can be a tool of possibility for begetting a different kind of Dalit consciousness in the positive sense of the term. (Olivelle 1329-1334)

In Sukirtharani’s poem “Portrait of My Village”, she portrays the Dalit life of the women in vivid manner. In the Tamil society where the categories like higher and lower castes are prominent, the Dalit women are positioned into the marginalized state. In this poem, the poet portrays a Dalit woman who does work for the upper-caste landlord and gets paid by him not through any monetary benefits but through some kind of sympathetic acts such as giving ‘fermented gruel’ (Sukirtharani 82). She works as a grass-cutter in the land of that upper-caste landlord. She also bundled the grass and carries them to the landlord’s home. This act shows the authentic good will from the part of the Dalit community to work for work’s sake. But the wage in return is based not on her toil but on her social position. The hungry Dalit woman gets her wage in the form of sour smelling gruel. The poet writes:

The thick sour smell
of the fermented gruel
paid as wages for grass cut and bundled,
received with palms cupped and raised,
hands already ripped by ulundu plants-
still pervades the body, like a ductless gland.
(Sukirtharani 82)

After the work is done, the poet comes to the landlord’s house to receive the wage. As an untouchable, she cannot touch anything of the house nor even she can enter into the inner part

of the household. She has to stay outside of the house-compound and wait patiently for her turn to get paid. At last, when her turn comes, she has to receive that fermented gruel 'with palms cupped and raised' (Sukirtharani 82). The upper-caste household would not touch her. She even cannot eat from any leaf of the tree. Her hands are the ultimate utensils she can use or either she eats from the ground. This line indicates the horrific social representation of the Dalit women through the practice of untouchability. Carolyn Hibbs in her essay "Polluting the Page" writes, "Dalit women bear the embodiment of pollution doubly: through their status as outcaste and through their female bodies" (Hibbs 263). The suffering state of the poet is heightened as she has to eat that gruel from her cupped hands which have already been 'ripped by ulundu plants' (Sukirtharani 82). This imagery is symbolic of the sufferings of the Dalit women perpetually evoking the image of Jesus who in the process of humanity's good, suffers from the crucifixion. The imagery of the bloody hands of the Dalit woman evokes the eternal suffering of Jesus in this context. The selfless sacrifice of the Dalit women to protect the wheel of society is portrayed here in this Dalit life narrative. Regarding this polluted valueless Dalit woman body Clarinda Still in *Dalit Women—Honour and Patriarchy in South India* writes:

The Majority of Dalit Women Workers are employed to weed, plant, harvest and sort the corps. Of all the types of wage labour, the most degrading is that which involves squatting and bending, performed on someone else's land. Although much of the works in the field is done by women, they are paid less than half the rate of men. (Still 96)

Another picture of the Dalit woman body is presented by the poet in "Portrait of My Village". The vivid imagery of the Dalit woman who has done the job of a carcass bearer is here in this poem. The dead animals of the upper-caste people are carried and buried by the Dalit people. The usual wages of that work are so meager that the carcass bearer cannot even satiate the hunger of that work. In this poem, the Dalit woman

works as a carcass bearer of an upper-caste landlord household. She gets the wage of a 'single measure of paddy' which has also been 'flung' to her (Sukirtharani 82). The term 'single measure of paddy' refers to the inhuman approach of the upper-caste people towards the Dalit women (Sukirtharani 82). Not only that but also the injustice and domination through the economic deprivation is also very prominent here. The word 'flung' suggests that the untouchability of the polluted Dalit woman body is perpetually present in Tamil society. Alongside this, the word also indicates at the inhuman Dalit life narratives of the Dalit women treated with utmost indifference by the upper-caste people. The poet narrates the Dalit life not only through the subjective lens but also making those subjective experiences into the objectification of Dalit life and narratives. She uses the word 'us' and combine it with the term 'flung to us' which provides a glimpse into the whole Dalit world of Tamil society.

The poet, thus, narrates the double existence of the people of the Tamil society—the dual presentations of life where the two sides of the life are very distinct. Sukirtharani writes in 'Portrait of My Village':

Standing at the untouchable distance,
while the portrait of our village
frames itself at a place of double existence
always vigilant. (Sukirtharani 82)

The phrase 'untouchable distance' is indicative of the caste-divided society and the marginalized state of the Dalit women where they have to remain always away from the mainstream society maintaining a distance of untouchability—polluted body. This distance is the rift which has been there throughout generations of malpractices done on the Dalit people especially the Dalit women even within the Dalit community as written by Anindita Pan in *Mapping Dalit Feminism—Towards an Intersectional Standpoint* "Dalit women narrate that after they return from work their children do not want to touch them because of the stink and dirt" (Pan 1329-1334). It is a frame of the village

which the poet portrays in an ironic way to show the ‘double existence’ there—the upper-caste leading a life of amplex and power and the lower-caste Dalit women leading a life of scarcity and marginality (Sukirtharani 82).

The portrayal of the Dalit women lives in Tamil society is found in another poem of Sukirtharani— “A Faint Smell of Meat”. It is a common fact that the Dalit Panchamas live outside the village. They must live upon the carcasses of the dead animals of the village. It is because their food habit must show their lower-birth and derogatory origin in the caste-based strata of life. They must deskin the dead animals and do the other perfunctory jobs related to that such as making shoes with the leather and preparing musical instruments with the tanned skin. The smell of the dead animals with their rotten flesh becomes the identity of the Dalit people in the village. The poet says that in the upper-caste people’s minds, she smells faintly of the rotten flesh. Sukirtharani writes in ‘A Faint Smell of Meat’ in an agonized tone:

In their minds

I, who smell faintly of meat,

My house where bones hang

Stripped entirely of flesh (Sukirtharani 80)

The faint smell suggests the invisible existence of the Dalit women treated with utmost indifference by the upper-caste people. The bodily existence of the poet has dwindled into the air and she becomes a non-physical entity having no flesh and blood of her own as if she is invisible. This transformation from physical to aerial is the process through which the Dalit women have been translated into invisibility of existence where they are pushed into the periphery. Again, the stripped bones suggest the unsympathetic oppression of the upper-caste people upon the Dalit women. The leech-like suckling of the blood and worm-like biting and chewing of the flesh of the Dalit women makes them nothing but naked bones. There is no flesh remained upon those bones. The utmost sign of deprivation of the natural wealth by the upper-caste people upon the Dalit people is mentioned

and indicated here through the imagery of stripped bones. The Dalit women are like ‘meat smell’ and ‘stripped bones’ to the upper-caste people. These transformative imageries bring out the narrative of the Dalit women-life in Tamil society. This smell makes their body polluted and they achieve the status of a morally deteriorated woman in the eyes of the upper-caste patriarchy as S.J. Aloysius et al. in the essay “Why Intersectionality is Necessary” point out “Given their untouchability status and characterization as women of ‘loose morals’, irrespective of age and marital status, they are perceived as available for male exploitation and control” (Aloysius et al. 180).

Sukirtharani uses the polluted body of the Dalit woman as the source of resistance in the process of decoding the ideology of caste and gender oppressions upon the Dalit women. That is why, in some of the cases her poems are termed as the obscene ones. But she creates a different Dalit dimension where the experience of Dalit women is not being analysed in terms of only gender, but in terms of body also. Her language of the bodily expressions is not based on the mainstream patriarchal language and the terms and phraseologies from there. But her language is procured from a desire to create a new type where the terms and terminologies are based on her own experience of being a Dalit woman having a polluted body. Actually, she feels an urgency to create a new vocabulary of her own as the mainstream Casteist patriarchal society and its language do not have sufficient capacity to express that agony which is based on the caste-based bodily oppression. The upper-caste patriarchy believes it to be normal and natural and their birth right to oppress the Dalit women and to possess the body of them. Thus, their codified language prepared with such norms would always fall short for the bodily oppression experienced by the Dalit women at large. In the poem “Infant Language” Sukirtharani writes:

I need a language

still afloat in the womb

which no one has spoken so far,

which is not conveyed through signs and gestures. (Sukirtharani 77)

It is generally perceived that Sukirtharani's poems are full of obscenity and vulgar representation of Dalit woman's body. She presents the Dalit woman-body in the language of vulgarity and obscenity in the tradition sense of the term in order to many of her purposes—(a) Subversion of the normative norms, (b) Presentation of the Dalit woman-body as a source of power and possibility through difference and (c) Body as a weapon of resistance to deconstruct the patriarchal oppression. In the Dalit literary fields, the representation of the Dalit women is very normative. Even in case of the Dalit literature written by the Male Dalit writers, representation of the Dalit women is conveyed through the sympathetic terms. In most of the cases, the Dalit male poets represent the Dalit woman-body as a space where all the oppressions fall to demolish the human conscience of a Dalit woman. The poets like Namdeo Dhasal, Baburao Bogul, J.V. Pawar, Daya Pawar et al. present Dalit Woman-body as an object drawing sympathetic attention from every side of the possible way. Most interestingly, almost all the Dalit male poets wrote poems on Dalit mother as a fountain of inspiration to them—who often forgets to take care of her own body, whose body is only prepared for the menial jobs of the casteist society, whose body is preconceived and predestined as a dump of flesh and blood having no sensory response. These Dalit male poets' representation of the of the Dalit woman-body is a mere object sexual and psychological oppression. They represent the Dalit Woman-body as an object of kindness and sympathy as if they are writing from the above. This intra-representation of the Dalit woman-body by their own male counterparts themselves ultimately leads the Dalit women go deeper into the margin and lost their identity as a woman along with strengthening the societal casteist identity. The Dalit woman-body in the Dali male narratives too is portrayed as untouchable, ugly, impure and repulsive etc. In fact they are almost dissipated as Sharmila Rege in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* states, "There was a complete absence of anti-

race/ Black/ Third-world centred feminist theory" (Rege 6).

But Sukirtharani subverted these notions of the representation and intra-representation by portraying the so-called ugly Dalit woman-body in such a way that that very ugliness becomes the source of power and pride often constructing a newer kind of powerful body of a Dalit woman. She invested the sense of possibility within that impurity of the body of a Dalit woman. Consequently, in her hand Dalit woman's untouchable and impure body becomes the ultimate source of possibility as a woman. The norms through which the patriarch judge the Dalit woman's body are deconstructed and the patriarchy now cannot fathom the depth and mystery surrounding the body of a Dalit woman. Sukirtharani does not want to hide that ugly body as the upper-caste society feels it repulsive while watching it, rather she wants to show it more to scare away the oppressor in order to have her own space to attain a sense of victory over the dominance of the upper-caste people. She is rejecting sympathetic representation or intra-representation and holding herself to narrate her own ugliness and impurity to usher resistance upon the face of those metanarratives. Thus, the smell of the animal carcasses from her body as it is very common in their house as a person belonging to Pariah community in Tamil Nadu, becomes a sense of her identity. She presents that smell of her body not with a shame but with a pride as if it is her body's identity and possibility. This way she rejects the sympathetic representation over resistance creating a new sense of aesthetics in her poems as Barninee Mukherjee in *When a Dalit Woman Writes Poem* states:

"In this regard aesthetics of the women poets, coming from the lowest strata of the Indian society deserves special treatment, this is because, leading a double-edged life challenged by caste and gender discriminations, they ventilate their feelings through literary works amid struggle with various other atrocities and deprivations for generations." (Mukherjee 1329-1334)

Sukirtharani, in that process debunks also another patriarchal notion of obscenity which possesses the historic sense of rights to justify the linguistic use either with sophistication or with obscenity. She uses the so-called vulgar language to present her body in an authentic manner. Her

purpose was not to hide her bodily pain or to present her body as an object drawing sympathy, rather she uses that unconventional language to present her body in order to make an object of revolt and resistance.

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